



Political violence and young people: Exploring levels of risk, motivations and targeted preventative work

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POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Exploring levels of risk, motivations
and targeted preventative work

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Report produced for Co-operation Ireland.

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SECTION 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last few years, regional conflicts across the world have intensified and, in turn, have prompted increasing terrorist alerts along with amplified national security and surveillance (Gratton, 2009). Changes in national security have led to increased ‘tension and the deterioration of trust between the various ethnic and cultural groups’ (Gratton, 2009, p.37). One significant consequence of such global developments has been ‘a growing physical and “psychological” communal segregation at a local level’ (Gratton, 2009). In recent years, the UK has seen a number of racially motivated attacks ‘emanating from the increasingly “sensitive” development of cultural and ethnic diversity and the resultant prejudice and discrimination’ (Gratton, 2009, p.50). These types of attacks have not just occurred in the UK but have been witnessed in numerous other countries around the world. Concerns over self-radicalisation have heightened in recent years, especially following the attacks in Oslo and Utoya in July 2011 by Anders Behring Breivik and the shooting in Toulouse in March 2012 by Mohamed Merah. In particular, there have been growing fears that such attacks could motivate others to follow suit. The murder of British soldier Lee Rigby by Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebawale on the streets of London in May 2013 further prompted these fears (Dodd & Halliday, 2013). Further concern has been caused by the publication of alarmist intelligence reports and increasing media reports regarding EU citizens traveling to Syria to fight alongside ISIS (Chulov, 2012; Lakhani, 2014). Following such global trends, the EU Commission Declaration in January 2014 called for increased efforts to prevent youth radicalisation (European Commission, 2014).

It has been well documented that throughout history young people have been part of various organisations that both promote and carry out violent attacks (Gratton, 2009). This assumption has been reinforced by increased media reporting and research that has found young people are both perpetrators and victims of violence (Gratton, 2009; Hanson, 2005; Magnusson and Baizerman, 2007; Hamilton, Radford and Jarman, 2004; Gallagher, 2004; Reilly, Muldoon and Byrne, 2004; Harland, 2001; Bullock and Tilley, 2002). The likelihood of young people becoming involved with such organisations is linked to a range of factors, from living in a society with a history of violence, being recruited and self-selecting a group, to being forced to become a member (Homeland Security Institute, 2009). There is growing evidence that youth are being drawn into terrorist/extremist groups (Johnston, 2007). One such alarming story emerged in 2009 when the Association of Chief of Police Officers reported that over 200 school children in Britain, with some as young as 13 years of age, were identified as at risk of being groomed by so-called “radicalisers” (Hughes, 2009). The children were identified as part of the Channel Project, which asks communities to be vigilant when looking out for vulnerable children who may be at risk of extremism or are susceptible to being groomed by radicalisers (Hughes, 2009). The project’s aim was not to criminalise these children but to intervene and offer the children assistance and guidance.

Radicalised grooming has occurred around the world, from the UK (Johnston, 2007; Hughes, 2009) to Afghanistan and Sri Lanka (Singer 2005), and from Somalia to Iraq, to name but a few (National Counterterrorism Centre, 2009). However, it has transpired that the role of youth in terrorist groups is changing, with growing documentation of youth carrying out or attempting terrorist attacks using methods such as suicide bombing (Mudd, 2009). In addition, changes are also occurring in terms of demographics, with even younger people and higher proportions of women and girls joining these groups and carrying out attacks (General Intelligence and Security Services, 2002; Singer, 2005). Recently, shockwaves were sent through the UK over news of Talhal Asmal, the country's youngest suicide bomber (BBC News, 2015). At just 17 years old when he carried out an attack in Iraq, Asmal's family believe that he was groomed online. The attack on the city of Baiji in Iraq by Asmal and three other suicide bombers caused the death of approximately 11 people (BBC News, 2015).

The Internet has been identified as a popular tool that is being used more often by terrorist groups to gather support, spread propaganda and recruit and radicalise potential members. In fact, there have been cases of self-radicalisation as a result of Internet use. There are also growing numbers of active terrorist websites, with a count of 6,940 active sites in 2009 in comparison to just 12 sites 10 years prior (Weimann, 2009). These figures demonstrate the increased use of the Internet by terrorist groups.

As noted, young people have been targeted by terrorist groups. However, little research has been carried out on the specific circumstances and processes surrounding recruitment, radicalisation and utilisation (Homeland Security Institute, 2009). A recent study by the Homeland Security Institute (2009) was carried out to gain insight into how school-aged youth are being recruited, radicalised and utilised by terrorist groups. This study posed questions to ascertain the contexts in which the process of recruitment and radicalisation occur, factors leading to youth vulnerability, as well as susceptibility to being groomed by radicalisers, venues, circumstances and tools used to target young people. The researchers looked at the way youth are targeted by a number of groups such as Hamas, Al-Qaeda, ETA and others. The study found that recruitment essentially occurs in common places such as schools, universities, religious institutions, after-school clubs and the Internet. It was also found that these groups incentivise young people to become group members and that there have been instances of forced membership or deception.

The Internet was found to be a major site for recruitment and garnering support and a useful platform for disseminating information and propaganda (Homeland Security Institute, 2009).

Undoubtedly, youth radicalisation, recruitment and utilisation are increasing problems, and are occurring in different circumstances and contexts around the world. When it comes to this issue, the Northern Ireland context is no exception.

Northern Ireland has a long history of conflict that extends centuries before the modern part of the conflict, which is referred by some in Northern Ireland as “the Troubles” (Bardon, 1992; Stewart, 1989). This recent period of the conflict is said to have started in the late 1960s, with Northern Irish society witnessing over 40 subsequent years of direct political conflict (Cairns and Darby, 1998; Gallagher and Cairns, 2011). The conflict has been described as a political, religious, economic and psychological conflict (Harland 2009; Whyte 1990). Apart from the Former Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland experienced the ‘most sustained violent conflict over national identity in Europe’ (Acheson, Cairns, Stringer & Williamson, 2006, p.13). The impact of the conflict in Northern Ireland, with a population of some 1.8 million, has been extensive, and continues to have a widespread and deep effect across society (Gallagher & Hamber, 2015).

Since 1968, there have been between 3,600 and 3,700 conflict-related deaths, with half of such deaths being civilian deaths (Smyth 2001; Morrissey and Smyth 2002; McKeown 2009). The number of people injured as a result of the conflict ranges between 8,383 and 100,000 (Breen-Smyth 2012). Although a peace agreement was reached in Northern Ireland in 1998, the situation has been described as a type of ‘negative peace’, as the underlying causes of the conflict are yet to be addressed (Nolan, 2014). According to recent research, tension between communities still remains (Byrne, 2005; Knox, 2010; Leonard, 2012; Rogers, McNeill, Erskine & O’Sullivan, 2013). The impact of the conflict continues to linger, as sharp social and political separation persists. In addition to the continuing legacy of the past and the ever-present threat of sectarianism in the present, there is a growing recognition of the threat of the recruitment of disaffected youth by some armed groups opposed to the peace process (Campbell, Rondón, Galway & Leavey, 2013; Gallagher & Hamber, 2015; Hamber & Gallagher, 2014; McGrellis, 2005; McAllister, Scraton & Haydon, 2009; Moloney, 2009; Morrow, Robinson & Dowds, 2013; Rondón, Galway, Leavey & Campbell, 2014).

Young people in Northern Ireland have a complex relationship with paramilitary organisations. A lot of young people perceive the paramilitary groups as a real threat, while others are attracted to joining paramilitary groups as there are perceived benefits of becoming a member, such as solidarity, status and financial benefits (Lysaght 2002; Harland 2007; Gallagher & Hamber, 2015; Gratton, 2009).

Therefore, recruitment still continues within the respective communities (Gratton 2009). According to Smyth and Campbell (2005, p.4), ‘Young people are seen in terms of their potential to augment the ranks of one side or the other. Young people themselves report feeling “safer” if they belong to one group or another’.

In addition to recruitment, some young people who refuse to join the group face consequences, such as punishment beatings and/or shootings (Gratton, 2009; Hanson, 2005; Smyth & Campbell, 2005). Between 2001 and 2011, there were approximately 805 shootings and 862 recorded victims of punishment beatings by paramilitary groups (Security Situation Statistics, 2011). Paramilitary-style attacks and intimidation, despite the relative peace, are therefore ongoing in the present context in Northern Ireland (Gallagher & Hamber, 2015; Hamber & Gallagher, 2014).

Furthermore, social exclusion coupled with un- and under-employment is another major concern when dealing with the legacy of the conflict (Campbell et al. 2013; Gallagher & Hamber 2015; Rondón et al. 2014). One of the causes of Northern Ireland’s slow socio-economic progress is ongoing sectarian divisions, especially in low-income segregated communities (Davidson and Leavey 2010; McCormick and Harrop 2009; Campbell et al. 2013; Rondón et al. 2014; Gallagher & Hamber, 2015). Youth unemployment at 23.8% in Northern Ireland is significantly higher than the UK average rate of 19.1 % (Northern Ireland Executive, 2014). Alienation, in addition to deprivation, high levels of poverty and low educational attainment (OFMDFM 2013), has led to alarmingly low levels of aspiration amongst young people in Northern Ireland today (Breakthrough Northern Ireland 2010; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment 2010). According to Gallagher & Hamber (2014) “low aspirations in young people may lead to an increased likelihood of anti-social behaviour, community alienation and subsequent punishment attacks” (p. 74).

As noted earlier, there is growing acknowledgement of the various problems facing young people when it comes to their motivations to take part in political/extremist violence and behaviour. There are few strategies in place in the UK to counter violent extremism. As part of the UK, Northern Ireland is covered by the UK national counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST). The strategy was recently revised to include 'Irish Terrorism' (White & McEvoy, 2012). The approach used in Northern Ireland takes into consideration the political and societal context when assessing threats such as political and extremist violence. The approach used in Northern Ireland is recognised by the UK PREVENT strategy (Her Majesty's Government, 2011). PREVENT is one of the four strands of CONTEST. The aim of the strategy is to prevent people from becoming involved in/or supporting political/extremist behaviour. It provides guidance and practical help to try and help people avoid being drawn into terrorism. It also works closely with sectors such as education, religious charities/groups, criminal justice, and online prevention to minimize the risk of radicalisation (Her Majesty's Government, 2011). However, the PREVENT strategy has not gone without criticism, with some implying that it has been counter-productive (Gardner, 2015).

From a policy perspective, little has been done in relation to PREVENT in Northern Ireland. However, the Consultative Group on the Past, a body set up to look at ways of dealing with the past in Northern Ireland, noted that during its consultation, "one of the issues that most exercised people was the impact the conflict had, and has, on young people" (Consultative Group on the Past 2009, p. 72). Muldoon stated that, 'in order to create and maintain peaceful societies we need to understand the causes of conflict and prevent the "recreation" of conflict' (Muldoon citing Cairns and Darby 2004, p.454). According to Muldoon (2004), we need to further understand the young people who are at the heart of the violence so that we can inform services, service provision and policymakers. In addition, we need to understand the modern context and the factors that influence these young people in order to address their needs.

According to Schmid (2013), to fully understand this issue, factors that contribute to terrorism should not just be viewed from the micro level but also from the meso and macro levels. The micro level focuses on the individual and factors such as identity problems, segregation, feelings of alienation and marginalisation, prejudice, and deprivation and poverty. The meso level takes into consideration the wider radical milieu (Sageman, 2004), whilst the macro level looks at the role of the government and society and interplaying political and social processes (Malthaner, 2010; Malthaner & Waldmann, 2012).

Exploring the pathways to violent extremism has become an issue of intense policy concern at the local, national and international level. The Northern Ireland case provides an opportunity to both identify and analyse radical political violence in a specific context. It is a case study that may also throw light on the processes of recruitment and attractiveness of political extremism among young people, all whilst allowing further exploration of the mechanisms for engagement and learning.

The current project seeks to map out and develop a body of knowledge in Northern Ireland around a subject area that has only been superficially researched to date. The current project aims to provide an initial critical analysis of the behaviours and underpinning characteristics of young people (18-21) at risk of engaging in political/ extremist violence and behaviour in Northern Ireland. It also aims to identify pathways and social networks through which extremist behaviour by young people is encouraged, supported and given wider meaning. Lastly, the project aims to give a clearer understanding of what young people perceive to be political/extremist violence and behaviour.

SECTION 2: FIELD WORK

2.1 Methodology

The research, following ethical approval by Ulster University in March 2016, involved conducting a series of semi-structured interviews in April and May 2016, with a total of 37 respondents from across the Belfast, Lurgan, Derry/Londonderry and Strabane areas. The research involved 7 focus groups and interviews with 3 individuals across the region, including:

- Community workers and activists in areas of multiple deprivation in North and West Belfast working in both loyalist and republican communities;
- Community workers and volunteers from the loyalist and bands community in Londonderry;
- A youth leader in Lurgan in a republican area;
- A youth leader and young trainee youth workers from a nationalist/republican area in Derry;
- Community workers with a republican ex-combatant NGO from Strabane and Derry who work directly with ‘at-risk’ young people;
- Police personnel working in West Belfast in Neighbourhood Policing Teams.
- Police personnel working in Neighbourhood Policing Teams in the wider Craigavon area;
- A senior police officer in an area of high paramilitary activity by both loyalists and republicans;
- A consultant specialising in facilitating and mediating ‘at-risk’ groups;
- The co-ordinator of a Northern Ireland-wide funding programme which targets ex-prisoner and peripheral, non-mainstream NGOs;
- In this instance, the study of course cannot be said to represent all views in Northern Ireland and therefore functions as a pilot, exploratory study. Key themes from the interviews were extracted and trends and key issues are identified below.

This report is based on direct information from these interviews and focus groups. Throughout the text, quotation is indicated by the use of italic print. However, the reporting of the interviews has been deliberately organised to prevent the identification of participants. At the same time, the researchers have been able to highlight key common themes surrounding issues of responding to violent political extremism and radicalisation in Northern Ireland. Most references to geographical location have also been removed and responses are organised according to a strict schema of Community Activist and Policing Respondent. In many cases, this may have obscured the political background of the participant.

2.2 Understanding political violence and radicalisation in Northern Ireland

While the main focus of this study was to assess approaches to intervention designed to prevent violent extremism, the interviews also provided an opportunity to examine the context within which radicalisation takes place and some of the drivers which lead young people into participation.

2.2.1 The cultural context of political violence

In many parts of Northern Ireland, political violence has become part of the historic narrative of community identity and, by extension, of belonging and membership in a community. Indeed, both loyalism and republicanism are defined in their own terms and by the wider popular mind with willingness to engage in ‘armed struggle’ without external or formal legal political sanction.

While the level of political violence has reduced in recent years, the peace process has not eliminated:

- the tradition of celebrating and justifying the use of violence;
- the physical memorialisation and valorisation of violent struggle;
- community prominence for organisations, groups and people with a history of ‘involvement’ including imprisonment; and
- regularly repeated narratives of reaction and resistance, which shape ‘identity’.

Despite ceasefires, many young people continue to grow up in geographical and political communities filled with public reminders of the political and ethical necessity of armed struggle and consistent visual, narrative and ritual messages about enemy-others. While public institutions do not formally endorse these displays, they seldom take action to remove or confront these manifestations. Instead, they are generally treated as part of the physical and cultural fabric of defined neighbourhoods and part of “the normal life” of communities. Within these localised cultures of the “normalisation” of political violence, it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint when and how “tolerance” for organised activity mutates into informal “permission” for violent action, or even “incitement”.

“They stand on the shoulders of the heroes of the past. They say, look at what they did for us. They can identify with it. It gives them purpose value and an opportunity to offer a contribution.” (Community Activist)

“We have an overarching problem of an unresolved conflict. You have generations polluting this youth. You see people fighting the conflict through the past. That impacts on young people’s thoughts. It creates an overarching narrative. It creates more avenues for people to get up to. There are adults out there looking for people to throw the snowballs”. (Community Activist)

“History is taught by murals and families not by schools. Who has the authority to teach?” (Police Respondent)

“In [this area,] 600 people went through prison and that tells a story. In [another area] local history, families, disenfranchisement, impatience, parades (event trigger) all shape an approach that goes far beyond one person”. (Community Activist)

“There is a notion out there that young people will join as part of the romance, to be part of something”. (Community Activist)

Despite the fact that the large majority of political activity is now supportive of political co-operation and engagement with the state, including working with the police, there are residual pockets of organisation and leadership that continue to oppose political settlement and any close co-operation with police and/or continue to retain their own independent paramilitary capacity. These residual actors can rely on a degree of ambivalence and wariness in the informal culture of many communities around the new political arrangements and continuing evidence of cultural and political suspicion.

Paradoxically, the fact that the leadership of the traditional loyalist and republican organisations have been broadly supportive of the peace process since 1994 may have also allowed the remaining “dissident” and paramilitary groups to reach into a marginalised fringe whose alienation now includes alienation from local political leadership. Respondents said that dissident groups use local networks and social media to accuse Sinn Féin of selling out the cause by joining the policing board, administering in Stormont, shaking hands with the Queen and “letting the police into our community”. From the perspective of dissident groups, Sinn Féin has become part of the “bad guys club” – i.e., “worse than the police”.

As a youth worker noted:

“The vast majority are not politically motivated, the danger is the other way. The young people don’t have any respect of the head of the paramilitary group”.

Among our interviewees, the predominant view was that direct recruitment was focused on young men, particularly those aged between 12 and 25. Organisations engaged young men through appealing to a culture of drinks, drugs and the attraction of violence. Men were seen as “warriors”. Girls were critical to creating a culture of approval but were not expected to participate directly in violence. One respondent felt girls were happy to be “on the fringe”. While there had been some incidents of young girls arranging fights (not political) on social media, and some attempts to recruit girls, active engagement in violence involving girls was exceptional.

“In reality, the younger people that we work with have acquired sectarianism, they have not lived sectarianism”. (Community Activist)

“My concern is that the flow is not stopping: strong family links with histories are very continuous. No surprises there. We are also seeing a bit of misty-eyed romanticism about the fight on both sides. The group that we are looking at skipped a generation – grandfather-child. A generation was missed but the new ones want their slice of the pie.” (Police Respondent)

Political narrative does not erupt spontaneously from an individual source but is incubated within a “culture” where permission is reinforced by multiple sources, making it hard to predict when, where and who will engage in violence. Consistent small signals are embedded within everyday life, despite macro-political efforts to reduce hostility. Large numbers of people, rituals and unnoticed signals have an unacknowledged stake in generating and maintaining a “permissive environment”. Personal pathways to radical extremism emerge within this wider culture of permission for, or even endorsement of, a cause.

“You cannot over-emphasise the layers of meaning that goes with the stuff – people don’t buy things with British fruit labels. The sense around the narratives is important”. (Community Activist)

“They walk to school every day beside murals and memorials. There are pictures of 3 IRA men murdered by the RUC. Whatever story is told – there are never two sides. We were in a school today and two guys shouted out RUC scum and there were hundreds there. They confront the police”. (Police Respondent)

“You can physically see people telling their children not to speak to police. ‘Don’t be doing that.’ It is not just one area, but it is in families. Small communities in large communities. It’s very localized. It isn’t all the time.” (Police Respondent)

“The constant acts of remembrance are more important than the reason why. The ritual keeps people caught in.” (Police Respondent)

“Dissident activity requires a basis in support, and they get that by driving us out and doing the policing.” (Police Respondent)

2.2.2 The continuing challenge of change in policing

After 30 years of sustained front-line security, the police institution in Northern Ireland, the RUC, was primarily designed to respond to public disorder and terrorism threats. Recruits overwhelmingly came from Unionist and Protestant backgrounds. The Patten proposals after 1999 were specifically designed to rectify this situation, introducing dramatic reforms to prioritise policing with the community and human rights, and to change the composition and cultural norms of the policing organisation (now the PSNI) to reflect the diversity of the whole community.

The depth of the legacy of violence, suspicion and political contention over policing has, however, left a deep imprint on communities, politics and professional approaches to policing, especially in relation to violent extremism. Commitments to change by police and politicians are constrained by a number of practical obstacles, which are often described as “legacy issues”. Among the most important are:

- Continuing territorial separation by religious and cultural tradition, particularly in areas of social housing in most major towns and cities. Despite a relative peace, the public environment of many areas continues to be dominated by displays of political allegiance to defined traditions. Often these areas are also areas of long-term multiple social deprivation. Young people grow up surrounded by community politics, images and norms which are rooted in past hostility and violent struggle, even where political support for violence has ended.
- A cultural legacy of suspicion of police and policing in some areas, especially in those republican areas where opposition remains active and therefore compromises peace. Such opposition may include active support for violence.

- Emerging suspicions in some loyalist areas that change in the police to build relationships with republicans and nationalists takes place at the expense of penalising them.
- Continuing disputes over cultural and political issues that remain unresolved, which create regular public order challenges that the police are obliged to manage.
- Paramilitary organisations and legacy structures that continue to survive in many forms. These may vary from political and community associations to active local groups claiming association with past political goals. The organisations may engage in drug dealing and other economic crimes as well as violent “punishment” against targeted youth. The range of activities – from purely cultural and political, through to party allegiance, criminal gangs and active units seeking political goals – and the ability to move from one to the other under changing circumstances, remain features of many parts of Northern Ireland.
- Issues of historical violent crimes that remain under formal investigation. Such crimes require the “new” police to investigate crimes in which the role of the “old” police is in question, and to do so in a context where the crimes of those who opposed the police are often more difficult to investigate due to lack of evidence. The risks of contamination by the old of the new as a result of poor or differential investigations, and by renewed political contention over policing and by the diversion of resources, are considerable.

Policing in the community takes place in the context of these changes and challenges. Policing is also taking place in a context where communities and police officers are seeking to adjust to unknown circumstances while applying principles of accountability, partnership and international human rights. The result is an almost unique set of circumstances of particular importance when considering policing and violent extremism.

2.2.3 Motivations for involvement in violence

Many respondents underlined that changing social, economic and political circumstances both facilitate and/or inhibit recruitment. Among the most significant issues were:

a. Local political leadership and circumstances, including relationships with the authorities

The political leadership of both loyalist and republican communities is not uniform in all areas. One of the consequences is that pathways to violence can depend on local circumstances, as some areas appear to be similar in socioeconomic terms but are more or less vulnerable than others. Specific activities may be used to recruit people or to create circumstances, which promote more extreme feelings. For example, young people can be more easily drawn in where rioting has been sparked. Social media can also be used to criticise different and opposing groups and the police.

“They say they are helping the young people. The police come in and they then say the police are harassing the young people. They are using it for their own political agenda. They are not exactly moral guardians for our young people.” (Community Activist)

“They need large scale confrontation to give themselves social capital. If the parades issue could be turned off, they would not have a shop window.” (Community Activist)

“The political disconnect between loyalist communities is total. The dissident groups on the republican side give shape to anger on a general level.” (Community Activist)

“The troublemakers are good at pointing to the things that scandalize: attempt to tell the narrative about the environment – when cops come in mention the baby in the pram. Don’t focus on the house being searched but on the inconvenience on the street.” (Community Activist)

“They wound people up and the young people went out and did the rioting.” (Community Activist)

“Where I was last, a lot of people saw very well-off senior republicans and saw violence as a way to make money. Here it is more, disenfranchised young people with a family link living up to a family ideal. They start at the low end – ASB, recreational rioting and build it up from them. You also have those who are alienated from SF, and have latched themselves on to newfound dissidents. That ability to suck young folk in is a problem. There is a generation who did not see the hurt and the turmoil.” (Police Respondent)

b. Socioeconomic marginalisation and economic deprivation

Many respondents highlighted a perceived lack of prospects (no job, no qualifications etc.) as factors leading some young people to “switch off” from society. Many saw this as a shared failure of society and its agencies. Such shared failure is said to include challenges of growing up in difficult homes with alcoholic parents and poor education attainment. Schools also often find it hard to deal with such young people and disinvest in them, according to some respondents.

“What they come up with is – lack of money, no prospects – it is the estate kids. There is nothing to do on the estates. All opportunity is taken away by the gatekeepers.”
(Police Respondent)

Some felt that paramilitary and dissident organisations were able to recruit more easily by being seen to be addressing social issues. Young people are also “bought”, being offered money for buying alcohol or being “looked after” in different ways. The paramilitaries also offer protection and the line between dissidents and anti-social behaviour can be a thin one, according to some respondents.

According to one respondent, this situation can sometimes become more extreme, with some young people being drawn into bigger criminal activity, which has large “incentives” such as earning £500 a week dealing drugs. As one person noted:

“Its like being in a clique. They feel that they have protection...that they can get in trouble without getting into trouble... if I join this group then it won't happen to me.”
(Community Activist)

Many respondents felt that identity politics is an avenue for violence when economic and social prospects are constrained:

“There are no proper avenues out of their circumstances. Identity becomes more important. People exploit that. For a lot of the young people, identity is all they have.”
(Community Activist)

“People do not see ‘reality’ the same way. Some young people are not stakeholders in one reality, but stakeholder in another. They do not see their stake in the reality.”
(Community Activist)

Educational disadvantage was a significant additional element for many young people. Many respondents believed that this contributed significantly to recruitment and anti-social behaviour.

“As I see it the big challenge for us is that the more we can encourage educational achievement, the less risk there is of young people falling into that (paramilitary activity)”.
(Community Activist)

“Problem was that it was in the state’s interest not to educate the working class. There is still a class issue within the unionist community. It might not be so apparent. There is snobbery there... I won’t be associated with those (bands)”. (Community Activist)

“Aspirations have been trampled in our community for a long, long time”.
(Community Activist)

Some respondents noted a feeling among young people that the schools disinvested in “difficult cases”, especially those seen as troublemakers. Troublemaking was attributed in some cases to pressure to show good results. However, where pupils were sent home early (because they were seen as disruptive in school) the effect was to exacerbate problems and export them on to the street.

c. Opportunity for personal advancement and local influence or power

According to some respondents, one of the primary reasons young people get involved with more politically extreme groups is to gain status and a sense of belonging. In some cases, young people also recruit other young people. Some young people might also join, not necessarily because they are vulnerable, but because they think it is politically interesting. However, once they get involved, it becomes difficult to leave the organisations.

“You see them walking around with their chests out. It might not be an earned status, but it is still perceived by them that they have it.”

“If you are caught by the police for riotous behaviour, it is a badge of honour. When a young fellow was arrested, his photo was put on social media and he was a hero. There is more posting for the republican movement than there ever was because they are all keyboard warriors. But the slogans are passed down from parents.”
(Police Respondent)

Another common theme was how this type of activity overlaps with criminality. For example, some respondents were of the opinion that some were using the sale of drugs to finance the “struggle”. Others seemed to suggest that “the struggle” was being used as a cover to allow economic activity. This ambiguity allowed the community and wider society to view such activities as criminal, while being presented by the organisation as business to finance the “bigger picture”. There is widespread consensus that some take advantage of this ambiguity for personal financial gain:

“It’s not about romanticism, it’s about gangsterism”. (Community Activist)

*“Will there always be young people in criminality, gang culture? – Yes.”
(Community Activist)*

2.2.4 Pathways to recruitment and involvement with political violence

Against a backdrop of community tolerance of an “option for violence” within the range of “normal” choice, it is clear that there is no single pathway to engagement and recruitment. Indeed, where recruitment is deliberate and targeted, the identification of members for involvement should be thought of as analogous to a process of “teambuilding” rather than individual recruitment:

“If you are running a football team then you want different types of people; someone who is good in nets, some who can run, some who can score. Plus, you go for what you can afford, what is available. There are also transfer windows, opportunities to recruit others. It’s a similar process”. (Community Activist)

According to a number of interviewees, organisations focus on gradual engagement and incentivise young people in different ways. The process can begin by asking young people to collect money for flags or a community cause, or encouraging them to become involved in local activities such as bonfires or protests. At the same time, they are told stories of “heroes”. Recruitment is made easier when imaginative sympathy for violence is aroused against a clear “enemy” or “foe”:

“You have to be for something. The key game everyone plays is them uns. If you can attach a ‘them uns’ narrative to things you can give it shape. If you can successfully direct it on to somebody else, you are on to something. They are anti- not pro-. Means you have to keep the anti- going.” (Community Activist)

Within this general approach, the participants in this study identified three primary routes towards radicalisation and political violence:

- a. “Pedigree”: Young people linked to families who are well-known for their political activity in the past.

“Here, dissident republicans are embedded in old families with no prospects. Radicalisation is a term that has been attached to this process. I see it as a very real risk.” (Police Respondent)

- b. Specific individuals who are targeted for their “kudos” with other young people.

“Once they go into secondary school the world changes. There are those who get into trouble from low-level criminality, and then there are those in tight families. And then there is the third group. The attraction for this new group is that extremism is a way towards spending power and local prestige. You can see examples of people who have come through the education system (and they may as well not have been through it) but they are driving round in big cars. That sells.” (Community Activist)

“It is a mixture of families and young people’s kudos... there is peer pressure. It only takes a few who are well known and the rest follow with it.” (Police Respondent)

- c. “Followers”: Young people who can be drawn into low-level violence, but who are generally less central to planning or ideology. Referred to locally as “Patsies”.

“The high end are the ideologists. The lower end are the cannon fodder. I could nearly tell you which one it could be. Whether there was political trouble, the lower end would end up in trouble anyway.” (Community Activist)

“They – the ones who are going to do the shooting – usually have got involved in low-level crime. The cleverer ones don’t get caught.” (Police Respondent)

2.2.5 Summary

This section has brought together a series of themes that capture the relationship between society and violence – both historical and contemporary. The below statements underpin this position:

- Within particular communities there is a normalisation around the practice and remembrance of violence. More specifically, young people are exposed to narratives that are rarely challenged and allow a blurring between fact and fiction;
- A culture of suspicion still surrounds the police and other security bodies within a small number of communities. In certain instances, the actions of the police remain a catalyst for participation in negative activities; and
- Social, political and economic circumstances encourage active participation and passive involvement in paramilitary organisations. There are a number of diverse pathways that conclude with young people being recruited into paramilitary groups, which affects intervention programmes.

2.3 Approaches to preventing violent extremism and engaging communities

All participants agreed that any serious action to prevent or reduce violent extremism could not be undertaken by police and security agencies alone. This section of the report sets out some of the key issues to be considered when assessing community and policing approaches to prevention.

2.3.1 Getting language and terminology right

In some areas of Northern Ireland, political violence is established as part of a “spectrum of the acceptable”, a tactical choice rather than an ethical absolute. Where political violence is partially normalised, describing it using the language of ‘extreme’ is inevitably “foreign”, marking out those who use it as “outsiders”, and potentially “hostile”. Similarly, the language of radicalisation is regarded as confrontational and judgmental. The language of “radicalisation” is seldom immediately applied in Northern Ireland. Others rejected any conflation of “radical” with “violent”. Indeed, many youth workers in this research considered it their job to encourage young people to be independent thinkers and hold radical thoughts, and were keen to draw a distinction between being radical or dissenting or resisting, and doing this with violence:

“The idea of it being extreme is only extreme because it’s not what we do, or it’s not what we like to think we do. What’s it like for radicals to be called radicals? What do they then call us? Does the other person find this word helpful? We shouldn’t impose our definition of their behaviour on them?” (Community Activist)

Likewise, being “political” and being “politically violent” were considered different things. Indeed, some programmes supported by donors aimed to approach groups who are not active in the political or peace process, and work to encourage engagement. For similar reasons, the majority of respondents also rejected any blanket use of the term “dissident” to describe opponents of political orthodoxy:

“If you’re labelled a dissident it can be a negative when you are simply a dissenting voice... It can have its own complexities and cause you problems, because it’s fed down from the top. It can have political connotations. But we would love to see more people becoming dissenting voices”. (Community Activist)

“It’s a problem with the North. It’s about normalisation. You can’t use the word dissent... don’t dissent...if you’re against this process then you are a violent radical...it’s become like a numbers game, if there’s enough support on this then we don’t care about anyone else”. (Community Activist)

“We understand that “dissident” is used to describe anyone who is not part of the mainstream. For us, the dissident spectrum is very wide – people who don’t agree with the peace process or mainstream”. (Community Activist)

Success in reducing or preventing violent political extremism will also require all parties to pay attention to the nature, content and consistency of communication, including a clear understanding of how language is received and understood by all parties. Participants in this study felt that greater space has to be provided for those who hold alternative perspectives about politics, ensuring that divergent views are brought into the mainstream and discussed.

Respondents spoke of the need to place themselves in the “other’s” shoes: “I’m not doing this to understand you. It is as I learn to understand you, then I grow. I’m doing this for my own growth”.

2.3.2 Policing

Although the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) sets corporate norms of “Policing in the Community” and “Human Rights Policing”, the translation of these into “normal” neighbourhood policing faces real obstacles in communities where an actively hostile cultural narrative remains. The challenges of responding to these circumstances were emphasised by many of the police participants in this study:

“You still couldn’t drive past [named specific place] when you would get a thud on the vehicle... Elements in the community are still trying to create a no-go area. Punishment beatings are a way of looking at an internal police. There is a toleration of violence among local communities”. (Police Respondent)

“Even among the people who are law-abiding, there is only 10% who would actually engage. Behind closed doors you would get more cooperation”. (Police Respondent)

“We were doing a very normal presentation and it became well-known that we were police, and the shutters came down.” (Police Respondent)

“You wouldn’t go into cafes. Police don’t use Chinese’s in [this area]. We can drive down to [outside of area] and there are no issues there. You are not infringing on their business. If they serve police, they get threatened with being burned out. So, we don’t generally use McDonalds’s, Sainsbury’s, Subway.” (Police Respondent)

“When there are rocket launchers, balaclavas and murals, it affects what we can do and how we do it... The body armour dehumanises us as police. People don’t see a face, they see a uniform, they see a gun.” (Police Respondent)

“The level of threat here is very different. I could go in a cycle patrol with no vest in East Belfast... The majority of people in the West would still prefer people not coming to their door. You have got busier, but it is still at arms length.” (Police Respondent)

“Volume crime issues are now increasing through the telephones. Yet we still have to ask, “Do you want us to come out?” (Police Respondent)

In a divided society, especially in towns where communities live apart but in close proximity, this protocol creates the potential for a perception of differential policing amongst communities, a very different level of policing-community cooperation in neighbouring communities and a different level of comfort among police officers regarding their relationships with different communities.

“North Lurgan – Mourneview. Anything in N. Lurgan has to be replicated in South Lurgan.” (Police Respondent)

“The working-class Unionist community here also has a lack of trust – they take offence quickly. We asked for a meeting with the Community association in [unionist area]. When our lot could not honour that, that was interpreted as ‘we had to come begging for a meeting.’ If there is any opportunity to create offence they will take it”. (Police Respondent)

Community tensions may also impact on relationships at times when resources are tight and priorities change:

“There is this feeling among loyalists now that “they” get everything – hotspot policing focusing on one area causes jealousy. Because they are not in the hotspot, it means we always go there in a car. There are big community meetings and engagement officers are not at them. All the work with the clubs and events in that area has disappeared.”
(Police Respondent)

The complexities of responding to these challenges to policing in the police service were reflected by the emergence of three clear strands among respondents. At a strategic level, police respondents continued to struggle to find ways to break the cycle of hostility and suspicion where they found it. The priority for these officers was increasing community confidence where they found it, both by delivering on lower level “normal” policing objectives and by being seen to tackle visible high-level local leaders of opposition and dissent:

“We have to be seen to address the real issues of the community – drugs, DV, disorder, the lot. If we respond to information, people like it. If an arrest is not handled properly it has the possibility of bad community impact. After every arrest we do we run a Community Impact Study: how did we do it? There is always a risk that if we address issues badly, we will lose credibility. The quiet people on the estate will not jump up and down but they will take a quiet confidence.” (Police Respondent)

“But to be credible we also have to tackle those who are important because they threaten violence. We are starting to address people who they think are untouchable. It blows away some of the myths that police protect people. The power of these urban myths is underestimated.” (Police Respondent)

In addition, there was some evidence of senior officers trying to ensure that the local knowledge gained by neighbourhood teams was used directly by response and emergency teams, whose primary engagement was for security and public order issues with the potential for serious dissention:

“I asked each of the Neighbourhood Policing Teams to come up with an engagement plan. This looked at high-level goals – radicalisation of young people, maintaining ground gained since Patten and then asked, ‘What activities are we going to do to achieve these goals?’ – schools, delivering policing on the ground including crime, searches, being visible. It was about delivering police activity on the ground and neighbourhood officers being in the lead. If we increase our counter-terrorism activity, we will include resources from the Neighbourhood Teams. They can provide the guidance who actually know the community and the young people. We want to get a bit more focus around that kind of thing... because of my neighbourhood officers, we were able to arrest people very quickly. There is no longer anonymity just because you come from [this area]... Is it working? Yes, I think it has stood that test.” (Police Respondent)

“We will provide a community impact assessment for the Response Team – time of day for arrest (after the kids go to school, after people have gone to work), do we need Land Rovers? (In Kilwilkie, yes – other places, no) It is simple basics and reminders. If there are young people in the house, let them out. If we can do it with the neighbourhood team, they will do it. We will assign a local guide from the Neighbourhood Team so that the Response Team has a sensitivity about this. We will also give people in the area as much info as we can, so they have some sort of a feel for what’s going on. That keeps the gatekeepers happy, because they have information.” (Police Respondent)

While this strategic intention was clear, it was also evident that other officers remained sceptical and resigned in the face of apparent constant hostility. Among these participants, there was a strong sense that police officers resort to the “assumed knowledge” of other police officers, relying on internal rather than community resources:

“But community still does not really contact us directly in North Lurgan – they know better. Intervention when something is happening is no good. The intervention is always before or after the event.” (Police Respondent)

“PSNI historically just get on with it. Foot to the board. Bosses just expect that. Calls start to stack.” (Police Respondent)

Among some officers, there was a degree of scepticism about the value of the strategic initiatives and a sense that they were not taken sufficiently seriously by other officers:

“Community impact assessments are fine but in reality, they are ticking the box. Nobody reads them. We don’t treat them seriously. We contact the community after a few hours. An NPT officer will go with response. Relevant contact points are now being complied with, but nobody knows the details.” (Police Respondent)

There was also evidence that, in spite of the official commitment to neighbourhood and partnership working, police culture continues to prioritise confrontational and security policing over locally based or community relationship policing:

“Response think of us [in Neighbourhood] as too touchy-feely. ‘We couldn’t sit with them terrorists’ is their attitude. There is going to be more of a crossover. Now the new chief says they should attend meetings with us. Hopefully, that will solve a bit of the ignorance, but...” (Police Respondent)

“Neighbourhood Teams are on the estate more often than Response. We have a better grasp of what is going on than Response. For them it is a once-off. I have just joined Neighbourhood from Response police. In Response policing, we knew nobody. We just went in and out, that was the mentality. We went in in Land Rovers and expected a violent response. In Response, you have enough time to come in, cover your arse and fill in your forms. In my opinion, too many in the police think – if I wanted to do Neighbourhood I would be in a Neighbourhood, so they don’t do Neighbourhood relationship building in Response Teams.” (Police Respondent)

However, the third strand of response evidenced that police officers continue to try to problem-solve around these issues, recognising the complexity of the issues and the long-term nature of the problems:

“Personal telephones work for people to contact you more than a central number. But security threat is always there and we have to think about security.” (Police Respondent)

“We did a careers convention in the school though and the police were very popular.” (Police Respondent)

“In Neighbourhood we were in yellow coats. We know who the kids are. If a kid throws something at me, I know who it is. Information like, ‘Your mummy is Caoimhe’ makes them jump. So how people speak to people matters. Some of our officers have no clue. Good programmes would require consistency. Money in community policing would save hundreds of millions on other stuff. Operation Stable Door we call it – AFTER THE FACT there is loads of money. If they take Neighbourhood out of [here], we will go back 10 years. But the Response teams will never know, because they don’t recognise the information we are providing.” (Police Respondent)

“Sometimes kids will talk to you in the town, but not in the estate. That youth club has been good progress. Lots of meetings in the club but we had to have no social media. There is still a risk. The leaders are happy to do it with the kids. It is still police going to them, not them to us. And they tell us they were told not to like us.” (Police Respondent)

“We now get a lot more calls.” (Police Respondent)

There was, however, marked frustration from a number of police respondents about the lack of understanding in the wider corporate culture of the PSNI for the need to factor in local circumstances to the setting of targets. As a result, some respondents felt that good work was not recognised, and that decision-making was not locally specific:

“What progress means is different in different areas. For us, it is still that one cup of tea, or a single programme or a single piece of information. Progress is measured in small steps. We change the language, which makes a difference. For most other areas, this is old hat, but for us, it is slow. It is low level in a global sense, but it is important here.” (Police Respondent)

“Sometimes that concerns me as an organisation. We measure it corporately in a way, which may not do justice to the local circumstances.” (Police Respondent)

2.3.3 Community-policing relationships

Many of the police and community participants in this study noted that local community sympathy for those engaged in violence is conditional, variable and limited. Nonetheless, many believe that intimidation makes it impossible to be seen cooperating with the authorities without risk of revenge:

“Many are sick to the teeth of the dissidents. But nobody’s putting their head up. They will get their mouth slapped. Even the relatives of some of these boys are embarrassed. But as long as you have a gun hanging about the place, people have to think.”
(Community Activist)

The development of a culture of cooperation is hindered both by historic cultural suspicion, particularly of police officers, and by the threat of violence exercised locally. This in turn prevents the normalisation of the law, with police continuing to police as “outsiders”. Many respondents felt that government and various politicians often fell into a trap of polarising communities or pushing people towards support for violent elements, especially by focusing on condemning activities that should be spoken about with much greater nuance.

Demonising a whole group both alienates whole groups and creates a narrative of “special victimhood” that fuels extremism. Some participants believe that isolating young people because they are from certain families or speak certain discourses further isolates them, and potentially leads to violent radicalisation. This is needed not only from the police service but also political parties that isolate certain individuals rather than enabling them to share their views before they link up with a violent group. As one of the respondents noted:

“There’s no such thing as ‘hard to reach’ community. It’s just that the community do not have what they need. There’s no such thing as an un-cooperative client. Just a client that doesn’t want to do it my way”. (Community Activist)

We need to engage the people who are likely to be creating the problems, people who are likely to not see it your way... We need to tell people, come along and look at other ways of doing things”. (Community Activist)

“If a loyalist ex-prisoner cured cancer it would be ex-killer cures cancer. Those who got their hands dirty will always have them dirty”. (Community Activist)

When police engagement with communities involves a narrative of alienation, and then results in securitised response and police enforcement or direct personal targeting, the result may be a cycle of hostility. This cycle may involve associated consequences such as withdrawal of wider cooperation with police. Classic disruption measures, such as stop and searches, are understood to be part of that pattern of hostility. As a result, these measures potentially fuel and embed resentment rather than improve community security, and above all prevent serious cooperation on issues of lawfulness.

*“Working with the police is not easy work. The police are the easiest ones to blame.”
(Community Activist)*

“You will never get police who live in the community in radicalised communities so they always come in as outsiders. Until we find some mechanism to bridge this, police are always outsiders, invaders.” (Community Activist)

“Often the poor relationship with police is ‘acquired’ rather than lived. Some people have been stopped and searched every two days – or twice a day.” (Community Activist)

“Stop and search... Police may not be explaining it right. Even if everything is explained, we are doing real slow time policing.” (Police Respondent)

*“Police can only engage indirectly. We are the sticking plaster for issues – there is always something behind it from the community side and it is hard to get underneath it.”
(Police Respondent)*

The energy of both the community and public agencies goes into defending positions not preventing extreme actions by individuals. It also undermines those in the community who are trying to work to prevent extremism or support change towards less violence. Breaking this cycle cannot be done by police officers alone. As one police participant noted:

“If we respond, then they get a rise. If we don’t, then they get off with it. We are damned if we do and damned if we don’t.” (Police Respondent)

Change will require long-term leadership and management in both community and police services designed to recalibrate expectations developed in a culture of suspicion or even hostility.

*“The blanket condemnation of paramilitaries prevents wider engagement with loyalist communities. We need to describe what we can do together not just what we can’t.”
(Community Activist)*

A sustained lack of prospects and social marginalisation were identified as significant contributors to anti-social and potentially extreme behaviour. Respondents pointed to inter-generational cycles of unemployment, low educational attainment, drug and alcohol abuse and young people growing up “waiting for their unemployment benefits.” Many participants spoke of young people looking to “find their place, a sense of belonging” and of the attraction of gangs which can provide a “home” while fostering extreme behaviour.

While it was acknowledged that there is no direct causal link between community poverty and personal behaviour, the statistical association remains unmistakable. Designing targeted community support programmes that are potentially preventative of violence, including offering alternative places, which can offer foster and belonging, was seen as a priority. However, this needs to be understood as a matter of shared responsibility and goals, and not just “throwing money at the problem”, “rewarding bad behaviour” or “supporting paramilitaries”.

Many respondents felt that partnership would be specific and local.

“Big policy has local outcomes. One-size-fits-all policies have no idea of this. There are always local drivers of issues. When it comes to violence and prevention, this is important.” (Community Activist)

“There is always a local element. Community life is always about managing, not about simple solutions”. (Community Activist)

Prevention strategies that cannot engage local understanding and support are likely to be misdirected and fall back on escalating security measures, which in turn generate and reinforce violent reaction. Successful partnership will be required to develop an internal culture which values sustained community relationships and can interpret the “cultural narrative” of their community partners.

“Visible local political endorsement is important... We sometimes try to force our way in. We get facilitated by Sinn Féin at times – when it is not elections. Our follow-up calls are very important. It makes a difference. Burglaries follow up during the day is very good. We get extracted to do other duties – policing parades.” (Police Respondent)

“Community reps are key to persuasion. Youth workers, an SF councillor, somebody with their own history. We do not have enough resources. And you get set back easily. So, we walked the estate for 4-5 days and on the sixth day there was a device. There is nothing for a while and then there is disruption. Four steps forward three steps back. Officers who have been here know that this is four forward three back. There is no one eureka moment”. (Police Respondent)

At the same time, police participants in this survey struck two notes of caution. First, there was some scepticism in police that funding itself was the answer. A number of officers noted that funding could create patterns of dependency, which, although initially well-intentioned, could create future problems and costs:

“You need to deliver measurable improvement and longer term. We’ve seen money used badly. Money say to CRJ, then it runs out, then an incident happens, and then they say that is because funding was removed, and you can see the waves. We create the crisis which does not help the long-term problem long term”. (Police Respondent)

“Funding is an issue. There is an attitude of, “What can we get from you”. (Police Respondent)

Secondly, police officers expressed a degree of frustration that non-police agencies continue to misunderstand the importance of their role in delivering policing outcomes, making decisions that appear from a community policing point of view to be counterproductive:

“We still can’t get anyone to try to see that we could manage this out through environmental changes. Council said this will cost £300k to change this – but to me, that is nothing. This is where community planning could be useful. We have been through the door of small initiatives. But we need a shared target – flags on every other pole, not every pole. We need milestones. We need meaningful movements that support both sides in a meaningful way”. (Police Respondent)

2.3.4 Working with young people

While it was agreed that radical extremism emerges from a more general background of tradition, toleration and permission for violence in the community, all respondents agreed that late adolescents and young adults were the most likely to be involved in violent behaviour. Participants therefore emphasised that action to address wider cultural issues must be accompanied by prevention and intervention measures directed at a core target group of young teenagers, aged 12-17.

“There is not enough done at the preventative end. Many organisations get people too young, or they get people who have left the youth scene. The key is the middle teenagers.” (Community Activist)

“If you can break the generational cycle, that is headway. Youth clubs are very helpful. But when I tried to set up an initiative in one youth club and the lady in charge was not happy about the kids working with the police, I was not really allowed to talk to kids.” (Police Respondent)

The costs of a failure to prevent action were obvious to many. As one participant remarked: “50, 60, 70 kids in a public order can be a big set-back for police.” (Community Activist)

All participants in this study believed that tackling violent extremism would be unsuccessful unless it is tackled in a coordinated way and in partnership. Coordination of resources between youth work, schools, community support, economic and social alternatives and policing were all regarded as vital components of tackling violent extremism, including the capacity to share information and understanding.

Part of the preventative agenda is a matter of offering alternatives and distracting young people from the attraction of violence. All respondents noted the role of families, community education, and schools and youth services in addressing emerging issues of violence with young people. A number referred to the need for role models who can demonstrate the benefits of moving away from violence.

One participant spoke of the benefit of re-connecting young people with their families, particularly fathers and their sons, as a preventative strategy. Critical examples include the strengthening of family bonds and connections resulting from the opportunity for a band to play for parents and grandparents at a school. Another respondent noted a successful programme called “Dads and Lads”.

Many community respondents highlighted the value of providing community-based opportunities for young people to engage in political discussions rather than avoid difficulties, especially providing opportunities for young people to hear and talk about opinions, or to become political without being violent. Some community organisations have been proactive in approaching groups who are not active in the political or peace process. They have encouraged them to identify issues and their underlying opposition to the peace process, and then worked with them on methodologies to address these issues.

Many of the community and youth work participants underlined that initiatives had to change quickly to respond to the changing fashions and interests of each cohort of young people. During the course of the interviews, a number of positive examples were identified by both police and community respondents, including sport and physical exercise initiatives targeted at teenagers, establishing longer-term relationships between police and young people through work at youth clubs, and consistent interventions with local schools. As one participant pointed out:

“Among this age group, influential role models change very quickly and are a matter of fashion. Emergent youth groups define themselves against their immediate predecessors as well as the wider community”. (Community Activist)

Or, as another put it:

“Getting a couple of pied pipers to work is important. But they get played out too. Now, ex-prisoners no longer have the same cachet as fifteen years ago. It is wearing thin... LGBT are the issues – not loyalists and republicans for most”. (Community Activist)

Community participants largely believed that schools should be a site in which more positive messaging about the future should be discussed and more real engagement with the past could be offered. While some schools appear to identify opportunities for open discussions on violence and the past, many participants in this study believed that the school system generally ignores the conflict and past, and avoids discussing it. According to some respondents, many school principals still do not want to take the risk with anything that is viewed as potentially controversial. The absence of engagement with evidence or challenge within formal educational structures left young people vulnerable to manipulation and receptive to emotive and politicised versions of history. In addition, the past can be distorted on social media and within the family and peer networks in order to fit certain political agendas.

“Our young people are more vulnerable as they have never been challenged. They have never been told their history. We have to provide pathways – otherwise somebody else will provide a pathway which meets resentment”. (Community Activist)

A number of respondents felt that schools were sometimes “disinvesting” from certain learners who were then more susceptible to anti-social behaviour and being drawn into violent activity. However, many respondents also agreed that schools could only be responsible for a limited number of interventions. Some respondents noted how underachievement was also not simply a school problem but also required parental and family involvement. They further noted that community leaders needed to demonstrate the value of an education and encourage not just young people but families to support education attainment.

Alongside schools and communities, many saw a significant potential role for what they called intelligent youth work. Such youth work is non-judgmental, less directive and built on safe relationships. It creates opportunity for influence rather than coercion, enabling longer term relationships with both adult leaders and peers:

“Our relationship starts in primary school and they have an association with the club till they are 19. That’s in a youth club, which is falling down round your ears. We would have a strong core staff that live in the area. We have even got someone from the local area in a full-time and part-time capacity”. (Community Activist)

“The core is creating real choices for young people. I give them an objective choice. I don’t tell kids from traditional rebel families directly, ‘Don’t be going down that route.’ I give them objective choices. But the story in the end is that they came here, they’ve talked to adults, they built relationships and they understand trust. They come away with a sense of people who they can work with”. (Community Activist)

“It’s like kicking a football. If I’m sitting here and the nets are down there, I kick the ball in a straight line towards the nets – and the nets represent, graveyard, being shot, jail whatever - and that’s where they’re going. All it takes is someone along the way to hit the ball a slight kick. And that’s what we do. Be it a driving license, an SSI card. We aren’t the panacea for everything but if the ball doesn’t end in the net, our job is done”. (Community Activist)

As one of the youth workers explained, problems must be broken down individually. Youth workers can signpost people on a case-by-case basis while also trying to solve issues directly:

“The central focus though is not to support the peace process. It is to benefit the individual...the young person is at the centre”. (Community Activist)

“The best piece of youth work I can do is personal relationship-building. Getting alongside the young person is the best thing I can do. I take the psychological rather than the sociological approach. We try to bring that approach right through. It is the best use of volunteers and part-time workers.” (Community Activist)

At its best, youth work can offer adults practical opportunities for genuine understanding of youth culture and engagement with teenagers. At the same time, it can offer young people more welcoming opportunities to connect with people in public agencies, including the justice system:

“We can bring something to the police. For example, the police say to us they don’t want to go to public order or arrest. Let us in first. Some of that is personalities. But then police are also police. They are trying to think common sense, and that is common sense”. (Community Activist)

“We have been working with the Quakers with teenagers. It was excellent, because it allowed us to address issues. The kids see you as a person. It breaks it down”. (Police Respondent)

“There is now a very good human infrastructure for looking after young people. We can work with PSNI, Youth Justice as well as young people”. (Community Activist)

“Political parties came along and tried to make an issue out of anti-social behaviour. They wanted to confront kids directly, but we said, no you can come along and see what we do and then you can advocate for the work that we are doing. That is much more effective than direct top-down force”. (Community Activist)

While many respondents were positive about the potential for youth work to engage with young people on unthreatening terms, it is clear that its value also depends on the ability of youth work to respond directly to young people. A number of participants emphasised that successful interventions tended to be personalised and “one-on-one”.

This included opportunities for individual mentoring coupled with relationship building that is humanised.

A number of respondents pointed out that the most alienated young people do not attend youth clubs or anything with an “official” or “establishment” culture. The increasing alignment of youth services with educational outcomes at times risks reinforcing this problem. While there was a wide consensus that programmes should build esteem, including opportunities to encourage pride, discipline and achievement, there was agreement that youth work practice required flexible tools. These tools included promoting sporting activities that raise expectations and offering practical skills and goals such as driving licenses and youth work skills.

“There are 10,000 people in this area and 3,500 are younger. You have to keep in touch with that change... The role of youth workers has changed over the years. Officially now it is ‘educational outcomes.’ That sits ok with me. But I would have started out with the hearts and minds sociological approach. Over the years, I have moved to the psychological approach. For me personally, the key is building the relationship. For them to get any educational outcome, they need the personal relationship”.
(Community Activist)

Those young people who have been isolated also need to be the focus of interventions. Respondents spoke of the need for youth workers to go to trouble hotspots instead of waiting for young people with problems to be referred to them. This would mean youth workers would need to work in the evenings, talk to groups of people and even confront paramilitaries. Respondents spoke of the need to work geographically in areas of interest.

“If you get young people on the periphery, we work with them and try and keep them away... Basically give them something to hope for in life”. (Community Activist)

“It’s not cool to go to the youth club. The hard kids go in at a different time. We can’t work with the embedded group”. (Police Respondent)

“We have detached workers and the only way is working out that person’s ticks – six detached workers. Our role as detached workers is that no matter how often they tell you to f-off, you keep going back. You have to work out how to get to that individual. Families are very important”. (Community Activist)

Among the participants in this study a number of tensions also emerged, especially over questions of funding for locally-based youth projects and projects designed by external bodies but delivered locally. The majority of participants believed strongly that successful work needed to be sustained and long term. Too much funding according to participants is for a limited number of schemes and engagements, rather than long-term and developmental relationship-building:

“If an agency parachutes in with wings and bells and loads of whistles, it makes a bit of a mess of local initiatives... In one case, the differences it created locally destroyed our local Youth Council... But I can’t afford to treat people differently – I don’t have the money to treat them differently. The ones with bells and whistles can, but their outcomes are actually the same”. (Community Activist)

“Once the project went there was a vacuum here. The young people had a great experience, but they felt let down. But while it was going, they got everything and I couldn’t compete. The relationship began and stopped overnight”. (Community Activist)

2.3.5 Summary

This section considered methods, techniques and programmes of intervention, and concluded that essentially “one size does not fit all”. The findings suggest that any approach requires the resources and skills of multiple partners and an understanding that knowledge of the environment is key to addressing the “causes” of youth participation in political violence. It was also noted that an emphasis should be placed on:

- Ensuring that there is consistency around the language used by agencies and service providers. The terms “radicalisation” and “extremism” have a tendency to alienate people and focus attention on specific issues and behaviours;
- The role of the PSNI is key to initiating methods of addressing many of the pathways that vulnerable young people take which lead to participation in political violence. Local police officers “know” their communities and have a unique understanding of the issues impacting on young people – the question is how this information (intelligence) is used to support intervention programmes;
- It was apparent that any action to address wider cultural issues must be accompanied by prevention and intervention measures directed at a core target group of young teenagers, aged 12-17.

SECTION 3: FINAL OBSERVATIONS

The research led the authors to a number of key findings, present policy makers and those responsible for the delivery of services. Furthermore, this led to a series of potential actions in the form of both short- and long-term measures to address the risks associated with radicalisation and political violence:

1. Radicalisation, violent extremism and society in Northern Ireland

Resorting to violence in a political or ideological context in Northern Ireland involves at least three elements:

- social and cultural environment of tolerance and/or permission;
- personal history; and
- opportunity, leadership, organisation or incentives.

The political history of Ireland has left a deep vein of “understanding” for violence and a relatively widespread family and community history of participation, support and tolerance. The political and legal order has been subject to challenges, which have had a measurable degree of informal legitimacy.

The mutation of a sense of “them and us” (difference) into one of “friend or foe” (hostility) has a long pedigree, leaving its traces in:

- amorphous concepts such as “allegiance”, “identity” and “culture”;
- semi-formal out-workings such as territory, community and paramilitarism and;
- formal structures such as sport, education and religion.

Violence is incubated within a “culture”, whereby permission is reinforced by multiple sources. Consistent small signals, many of which are treated as “normal” (such as the background display of flags and emblems, family histories of heroism and suffering and community rituals), are embedded within everyday life, surviving past macro-political efforts to reduce hostility.

Radicalisation – the process of increasing attraction to and resorting to violence – is influenced by external, local and opportunistic factors. Indeed, where recruitment is deliberate and targeted, the identification of members for involvement should be thought of as analogous to a process of “teambuilding” rather than individual recruitment. While some of this can be anticipated, monitored and measured, prediction also remains a matter of discretionary judgement and qualitative information.

Against this background, the participants in violence are never entirely predictable, although there is significant evidence that they are affected by gender (male), age (15-20), geography (violence is not uniformly spread) and class (violence outside the law has a deeper pedigree in economically challenged communities). They are also affected by personal factors including family, peer groups, mentoring influences, and by opportunities and incentives. This study confirms that these incentives and opportunities include family history, residual local organisation, specific local figures of influence, economic incentives and the possibility of advancement and local prestige.

Clearly, the political leadership of both loyalist and republican communities is not uniform in all areas. Specific activities may be used to recruit people or to create circumstances that promote more extreme feelings. For example, young people can be more easily drawn in where rioting has been sparked. Social media can also be used to criticise different and opposing groups, as well as the police.

2. The social background to radicalisation

There is an unexplained paradox in community understanding of radicalisation. Against a general background of antipathy to authority, the leaders among radicals seem to be attracted by the prospect of local advancement and status (heroism), whereas the followers may see joining in as an expression of, and antidote to, hopelessness and alienation.

Many respondents highlighted a perceived lack of prospects (no job, no qualifications etc.) as factors leading some young people to “switch off” from society. Many saw this as a shared failure of society and its agencies including challenges growing up in difficult homes with alcoholic parents and poor education attainment.

Schools also often find it hard to deal with such young people and disinvest in them, according to some respondents. Some felt that paramilitary and dissident organisations were able to recruit more easily by being seen to be addressing social issues. Young people are also “bought”, being offered money for buying alcohol or being “looked after” in different ways. Respondents said that the paramilitaries also offer protection and the line between dissidents and anti-social behaviour can be a thin one.

Yet, according to some respondents, one of the primary reasons young people get involved with more politically extreme groups is to gain status and a sense of belonging. In some cases, young people also recruit other young people. Some young people might also join, not necessarily because they are vulnerable, but because they might think it is politically interesting. However, once they get involved, it becomes difficult to leave the organisations.

Distinguishing between these push-and-pull factors may be important in defining effective prevention programmes.

3. Policing with or against communities?

Establishing neighbourhood policing creates real obstacles in communities where an actively hostile cultural narrative remains. However, policing becomes even more difficult when it leads to a perception that a whole group is being demonised. In this context, distinctions between force (legitimate) and violence (illegitimate) dissolve and even reverse, and create a situation where police action is always subject to hostility.

Policing “against” communities will always rely on escalating use of force and reducing local cooperation. It is in the interests of organisations and extremists to generate this dynamic, and strongly in the interests of policing organisations to avoid and reverse it.

However, without clear police and community leadership there is a risk that acute concern about violent extremism will lead to permanent polarisation. There is also risk of long-term damage to both police and community, and to the longer-term questions of citizenship and policing as a function.

In Northern Ireland, the PSNI has made considerable efforts to prevent this dynamic and to reverse embedded cultures of hostility. However, all parties agreed that change depends on long-term leadership and management in both community and police services that is designed to recalibrate expectations developed in a culture of suspicion or even hostility.

The Northern Ireland experience is that partnership is not an option in countering radicalisation; it is an essential element of success.

Serious partnership also necessarily includes active cooperation between police, communities and non-police public agencies (including schools, youth services, councils, environmental services, infrastructure and social programmes). Nevertheless, there is limited evidence of any coordination for a systematic culture of engagement when it comes to these issues.

4. The importance of internal police management for successful policing in the context of fragile external relationships

It is clear that the challenge of operating in a hostile environment in which acceptance for policing is provisional, changeable and fragile is a very long-term enterprise. Both police and community participants in this study noted that local community sympathy for those engaged in violence is conditional, variable and limited. Nonetheless, many believe that intimidation makes it impossible to be seen cooperating with the authorities without risk of revenge.

We found limited understanding within the police service of the need for internal support for community engagement. Central targets for progress seem to get priority over local targets. Yet progress and the development of working local relationships require long-term partnership and clear expectations and accountability on all sides. Again, the role of third parties such as schools, youth services and councils remain underdeveloped.

Within the police service, systemic support for resilience among police officers operating over a long period in a context of suspicion appears to be very weak. Police officers in Neighbourhood Teams appeared to be reliant on support from their peers in managing constant rejection and even risk to life, and had developed a “thick skin” culture, not dissimilar to the notion of a “third religion” that prevailed in previous times. The risk is alienation from and antagonism towards the community being policed. There is also risk of strong difference of experience and attitude in different command areas and between officers at the strategic level and neighbourhood level. As face-to-face culture tends to determine local attitudes to policing, such a culture has significant consequences for police effectiveness and confidence in policing. Furthermore, “cop culture” appears to favour response policing to relationship-building in the process of keeping people safe.

5. Young adolescents are a central concern of both police and community in preventing and distracting from the potential for violence

All respondents agreed that late adolescents and young adults were the most likely to be involved in violent behaviour. Participants therefore emphasised that action to address wider cultural issues must be accompanied by prevention and intervention measures directed at a core target group of young teenagers, i.e., those aged 12-17.

Preventing violence means offering alternatives and distracting young people from their attraction to violence. All of the participants in this study noted the role of families, community education, schools and youth services in addressing emerging issues of violence among young people. A number referred to the need for role models who showed the benefits of moving away from violence.

Many community respondents highlighted the value of providing community-based opportunities for young people to engage in political discussions rather than avoid difficulties. This was especially the case for providing opportunities for young people to hear and talk about opinions, or to become political without being violent. Initiatives should be capable of adapting to changing circumstances and trends among young people.

Clearly, the design of youth programmes is a crucial policing issue, but it is not, and cannot be, a matter for the police to design and deliver.

Furthermore, in a climate of suspicion, such programmes cannot be delivered by the state nor indeed by the community alone. Indeed, this is probably the biggest single example of the requirement for coordination and engagement in order to underpin partnership and the delivery of outcomes.

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